CHAPTER ELEVEN

HORACE’S GARDEN THOUGHTS: RURAL RETREATS AND THE URBAN IMAGINATION*

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The most beautiful regions of the world are the furthest αἱ δὲ ἐσχαταὶ κοις ὑς οἰκεμένης τὰ κάλλιστα ἔλαχον (Herodotus 3.106)

...the gem that encapsulates existence. Enter the gate, and find paradise: leave again, and re-enter reality. (Henderson 2002, 125)

1. Introduction

Pastoral (in its broadest sense) has long been synonymous with a rhetoric of contrast between city and country.1 Interrogating this contrast, pushing it as hard as possible, is deeply embedded in late Republican and early Augustan discourse. On its most basic level, this chapter explores how Horace Odes 1–3 test the possibility of articulating rus without an intimate understanding of the presence of urbs within its scenography. Its particular focus, however, is Horace’s fascination, in Odes 1–3, with the artifice of nature. Traditionally, Horace’s ‘nature’ poetry has been read ‘autobiographically’—particularly given the ever-looming presence of the Sabine farm, gifted by Maecenas—or at least as offering some degree of descriptive

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1 Skoie (this volume) sets this up excellently. As she comments, even Leach 1974, 72 does not quite dissolve the oppositional dialectic.
transparency. Instead, I suggest that we locate Horace’s interest in the countryside and landscaped nature at the heart of a unique poetic undertaking which tackles political identity head on, and which makes it impossible to divorce what I term ‘Gardening’ (imposition of design, order and aesthetics of landscape) from the most urgent Augustan issues. Indeed, this chapter works eventually towards a reading of *Odes* 3.29 as a conclusive statement of the intimate, disorientating, and inescapable connections between the poetics of *rus* and Augustan Rome, a nexus which Horace shows himself trying but inevitably failing to disentangle. Phebe Bowditch figures Horace’s Sabine farm as a ‘suppressed term or “absent center”’ for exploring Horace’s relationship with Maecenas. This works extremely well, particularly if we take the estate more generally as an ‘Augustan’ gift; but the gift is double-edged. It is both a product of the *clementia* and prospective gaze which characterize the Augustan settlement, and also an enduring reminder of the vicissitudes of civil war and the complex ambiguities of Roman identity.

Some texts to whet the appetite:

the merchant, fearing Africus—strong-arming
the Icarian waves—extols leisure and his home-town countryside,...

\[\text{luctantem Icariis fluctibus Africum}\
\text{mercator metuens otium et oppidi}\
\text{laudat rura sui,...}\]

*Odes* 1.1.15–17

In a Sabine forest I was rambling, when a wolf
(whilst I was singing about my Lalage, and out well-beyond
my boundary stone—footloose and fancy free)
ran from defenseless me;

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2 For perhaps the funniest recent treatment of this tendency (one that we all, however gracefully, topple into on occasion), see Henderson 1999, 117–118.

3 We can see this first in Vergil, whose context is set out by Gowers 2000, 142–143 n. 5. Cf. Henderson 1999, 145–146.

4 Bowditch 2001, 117.

5 Receiving a country estate keys into the issue of land appropriations after Philippi (which form an important theme, of course, in the *Eclogues*; but cf. *Satires* 2.2, 2.6.55–56). Bowditch 2001 is a particularly valuable foil for my reading of Horace; developing Leach 1988, her analyses of the complex relationship between Horace, Maecenas and Augustus in Horace’s poetry underlie my own approach (which is also influenced by Henderson’s speculative summation, 1999, 115). Bowditch’s discussion of how this pans out in the *Epistles* also offers an important context for reading the *Odes*.